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ABSTRACT

Major arguments, both pro and con, for applying the "schools of choice" approach to educational improvement in Detroit (Michigan) are described, and the results of a recent public opinion survey are reported. The main argument of proponents of school choice is that it will improve the quality of public education. Opponents of choice do not believe that it is possible to establish efficient markets in public education. The 1991 Detroit Metropolitan Area Public Policy Survey (DMAPPS) is the second in an annual series of surveys of residents of the Detroit metropolitan area. School choice was one of the 5 policy issues explored in the 1,500 telephone interviews conducted during the 1991 survey. The following points are highlighted: (1) proponents expect choice to improve the quality of education; (2) opponents fear that choice will allow society to evade its responsibility for mass education; (3) support for school choice varies throughout the Detroit area; (4) the highest support is for within-district choice plans; (5) support is greater among city dwellers than suburban residents; (6) support is also greater among those who rate their schools lower; (7) blacks are more supportive of school choice than are whites; and (8) overall, 42 percent of parents would consider sending their children to another district. Six figures illustrate the discussion. An appendix contains the 10 DMAPPS school choice questions. (SLD)

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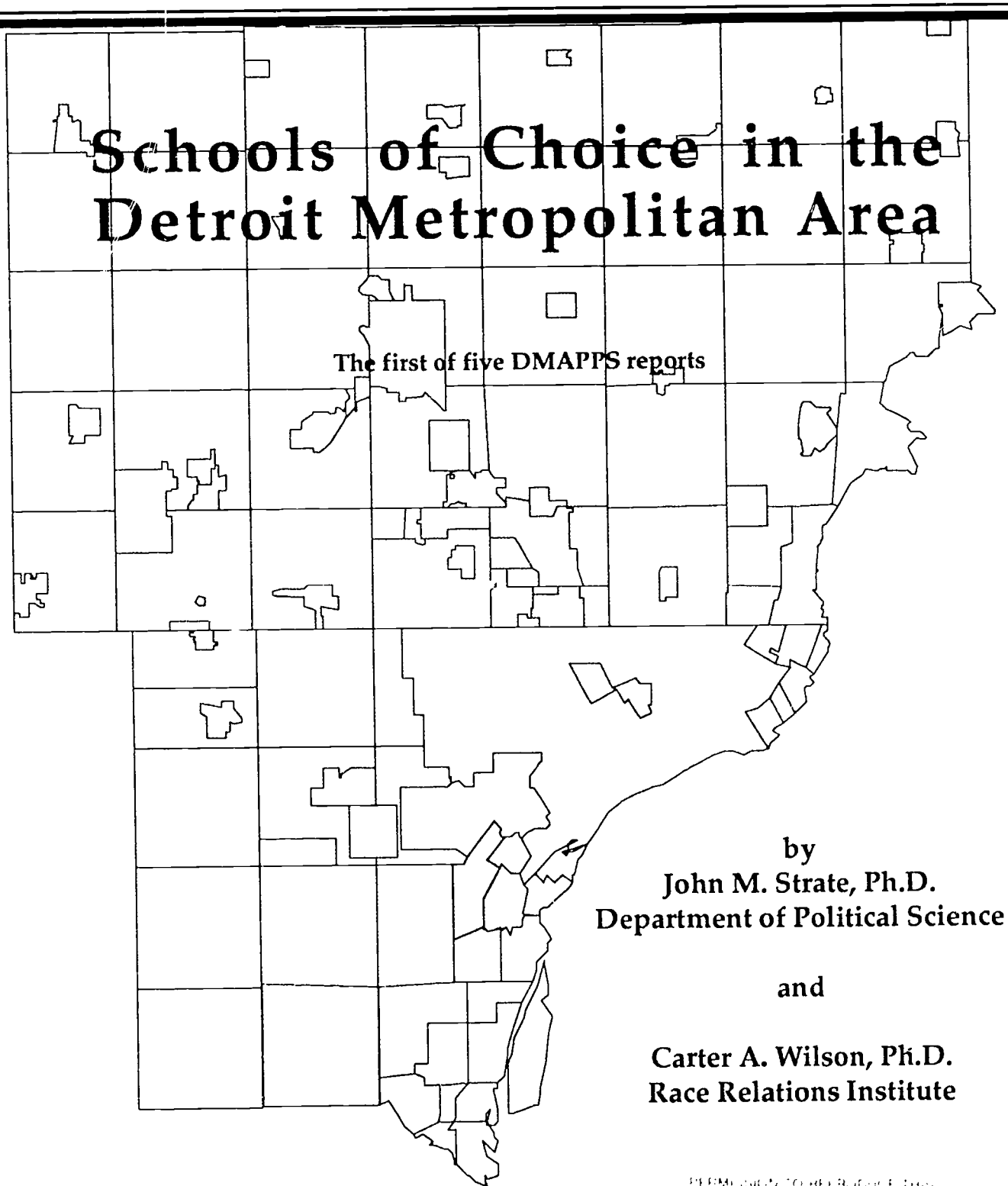
Detroit Metropolitan Area Public Policy Surveys

Schools of Choice in the Detroit Metropolitan Area

The first of five DMAPPS reports



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FOREWORD

The attached monograph is really two very fine papers appearing under the same cover. The first section is an issue paper very ably describing some of the major arguments, both pro and con, for applying the "schools of choice" approach to educational improvement in Detroit. The second section reports the results of a recent public opinion survey.

Taken by itself, the issue paper would be a significant contribution to intelligent discussions of whether schools of choice should be accorded a significant place in the process of improving Michigan public education. That second section, however, is probably the single most important document published in recent years on Detroit public education.

The data-based paper is important because it systematically refutes much of what we have been told about the prospects for adopting schools of choice as the predominant approach to improving public education in Detroit. Strate and Wilson found that Detroiters generally support school choice with blacks actually being more supportive than whites. Their findings contrast sharply with the claims of many Detroit education activitists that there is widespread and intractable opposition to schools of choice throughout Detroit with particularly strong opposition in the black community.

Perhaps this anomaly is not surprising given that most of the discussion of the appropriateness of "choice" has heretofore taken place among a local education elite with clear stakes in the current system of essentially political governance of Detroit's schools. On the other hand, Strate and Wilson went around the usual suspects to gauge the opinion of the general public. Once there, they found much deeper and more widespread support in Detroit for the market-oriented approach to education management inherent in schools of choice than even the movement's most committed supporters had expected to find. As a result, Strate and Wilson have made a very valuable contribution to assuring an honest debate over schools of choice.

Michael J. Montgomery
Director, Detroit Public Schools Progress Report
New Detroit, Inc.

PREFACE

Description of Survey

The 1991 Detroit Metropolitan Area Public Policy survey (DMAPPS) is the second in an annual series of surveys with residents of the tri-county Detroit metropolitan area (Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties). The survey is funded by Wayne State University's College of Urban, Labor and Metropolitan Affairs and is conducted by Survey & Evaluation Services of the Center for Urban Studies.

Each year the survey focuses on major policy issues confronting the metropolitan area and its constituent jurisdictions. Public opinion on five different issues were included in the 1991 survey:

- school choice;
- participation in the Michigan state lottery;
- fear of crime within neighborhoods;
- awareness of local government;
- the availability of social services in area churches.

Each of these five subjects was developed by a faculty member with a research interest in the topic and will appear as a separate report in the 1991 series.

The sample for this survey was drawn by a random digit dial technique, wherein each residential telephone number in the tri-county area had an equal probability of being selected. The random digit dial technique has the advantage of including all residential phone numbers, regardless of whether or not they are listed in telephone directories.

The interviewing took place between February 15 and March 20, 1991. Every telephone number received at least three calls, including at least one during the day to ensure contact opportunities across different work shifts. A total of 1,500 interviews were completed. The number of interviews conducted in each county was proportional to the actual number of households in each county. The distribution is presented below:

Geographic Area	Number of Completed Interviews
City of Detroit	397
Remainder of Wayne County	413
Macomb County	277
Oakland County	413
TOTAL	1,500

The sample of 1,500 metropolitan area residents produces a confidence interval for the tri-county area of +/-2.5 percent. The confidence interval for the city of Detroit alone is +/-4.9 percent.

Executive Summary

This study examines schools of choice plans and focuses on the potential significance of this educational reform to Michigan and the Detroit metropolitan area. It gives an overview of arguments for and against schools of choice, and employs public opinion data from the Detroit metropolitan area to assess levels of support for different schools of choice plans and the reasons underlying such support. The key points that emerge from this study are as follows:

- Proponents expect schools of choice to improve the quality of education. Choice will reduce waste and inefficiency in schools, enhance the power of parents, break the public school monopoly, reduce the education bureaucracy, eliminate the deleterious effects of politics in education, and facilitate desegregation.

- Opponents of choice think that education is a public good and that the control of public schools by democratic politics is essential. They fear that choice will allow society to evade its responsibility for mass education. They think that the goals of choice are overstated and that the plans will not work as intended.

- Although school choice has strong support in the tri-county area, the level of support varies with the expansiveness of the choice plan, geographical area and race.

- Among the different choice plans, the highest level of support in the tri-county area is 77 percent for within-district choice plans. This is followed by 61 percent for cross-district choice, 55 percent for tax credits and 48 percent for statewide choice.

- Support for choice plans is greater among Detroiters than suburban residents. For within-district plans, the respective proportions are 82 percent versus 75 percent. For cross-district choice, they are 75 percent versus 56 percent.

- Support for schools of choice is greater among those who give lower ratings to the quality of their public schools.

- Blacks are more supportive than whites of schools of choice, regardless of the specific plan. The main reason is that blacks give lower ratings to the quality of their public schools and are more likely to support reforms that might improve them.

- Among parents, 42 percent would consider sending their children to a school in another district. A much higher percentage of black parents (67 percent) than white parents (32 percent) would consider it.

In general, then, Detroit metropolitan area residents support schools of choice. However, whether or not such plans would be implemented on a large scale or only minimally are questions yet to be decided.

SCHOOLS OF CHOICE IN THE DETROIT METROPOLITAN AREA

INTRODUCTION

School choice has emerged as the major educational reform issue of the nineties. In the state of Michigan, it has been promoted by public officials, public interest groups and the media. Governor John Engler has made schools of choice a major part of his education program that will be announced this September. State Senator Dan De Grow (R-Port Huron) and Representative James O'Neil (D-Saginaw) have introduced a five-point school improvement plan which would require choice within school districts and would establish pilot cross-district choice programs.[1] An East Lansing public interest group, Teach Michigan, plans to launch a school choice referendum campaign to get the issue on the November 1992 ballot (*Detroit Free Press*, Nov. 18, 1990). The new superintendent for the Detroit Public Schools has announced that establishing school choice would be a major priority of her administration, and a number of Detroit Public School Board members have already introduced choice proposals.

School choice involves allowing parents, regardless of where they live, to decide on which school they should send their children. This means if parents are dissatisfied with the neighbor-hood school, they can choose another one. This departs from the present system, which limits most parents' choices. While some parents may be able to relocate to be near a better school, the decision to move is limited by family income, housing costs and other barriers. Most low-income parents are trapped in low-income residential areas where their children become captive clients of the neighborhood school. School choice plans expand the range of options open to parents.

There are at least four options or approaches to school choice discussed in this report: (1) within-district, (2) cross-district, (3) statewide, and (4) voucher or tax credit plans. All of these options represent a significant departure from the present method of assigning students to public schools based on where they live.

Within-district plans involve a single school district offering parents a range of choices beyond neighborhood schools, ranging from selection of alternative and magnet schools to elimination of mandatory neighborhood schools. The best known system in an urban school district is East Harlem, which has been a model for other cities.[2]

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[1] Two schools of choice bills relevant to this plan have recently passed the state Senate. Senate Bill 158 would require school districts beginning in the 1992-93 school year to implement a within-district choice program. See Senate Education Committee, "In-District Schools of Choice," *SFA Bill Analysis, S.B. 158, (S-2)*, 1991, 1-6. Senate Bill 159 would amend the State School Aid Act to allocate no more than $1 million to plan the implementation of intermediate school district schools of choice pilot programs. See Senate Education Committee, "Intermediate School District Schools of Choice," *SFA Bill Analysis, S.B. 159, (S-1)*, 1991, 1-4. Two other bills on the House side are in the House Committee on Education, HB 4107, which provides for schools of choice and HB 4563, which would enact district schools of choice.

[2] Sy Fliegel, "Parental Choice in East Harlem Schools," in Joe Nathan, ed., *Public Schools by Choice: Expanding Opportunities for Parents, Students, and Teachers*, (St. Paul: The Institute for Learning and Teaching, 1989), 95-112.

Cross-district or interdistrict plans give parents the option of selecting schools in a nearby district. A number of states have implemented such plans including, among others, California, Colorado and Iowa. The least costly and most innocuous way of providing this choice option is to allow schools at their discretion to accept a limited number of transfer students from other school districts. However, if only a few transfer students are accepted, this approach would circumvent choice and leave the present system unchanged.

Another option is countywide or statewide magnet schools. Such schools exist in about a dozen states.[3] For example, Wayne County might create one or two schools open to any student who resides in the county. Other counties would do the same. The magnet school approach leaves neighborhood schools untouched and uses established intermediate schools districts. It is limited by county boundaries, the capacity of the magnet schools and transportation costs.

An example of an expansive statewide plan is Minnesota's, which allows high school students to attend post-secondary institutions. Another aspect of the plan allows parents to select for their children any school in the state so long as the transfer does not upset racial balance. Thus far, however, only a small number of students attend schools outside their home district. Out of a total state student body of about 725,000, approximately 6,000 attend schools outside their home district (*Detroit Free Press,* April 28, 1991, pp. 6A, 7F).

Tax credit and voucher plans provide partial reimbursement, either through reduced tax bills or increased refunds, to parents choosing private or parochial schools. These plans have enjoyed little public support and no legislative success.

As is true of these school choice plans and other ambitious educational reforms, there are both proponents and critics. From parents and students to school officials to legislators, many actors at various levels are involved in the school choice debate.

ARGUMENTS FOR SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

The main argument of proponents of school choice is that it will improve the quality of public education. They contend that students, parents and teachers will benefit under choice plans. The most important benefit could be from the very act of choosing. Choice affords a better match between the desires and needs of students, parents and teachers and what schools offer. According to Anne Raywid, three basic premises underlie the notion that students will benefit from choice: "There is no best school for everyone, the deliberate diversification of schools is important to accommodating all and enabling each youngster to succeed, and youngsters will perform better and accomplish more in learning environments they have chosen than in environments which are simply assigned to them" (p. 14).[4]

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[3] Joe Nathan, "Progress, Problems, and Prospects with State Choice Plans," in Joe Nathan, ed., *Public Schools by Choice*, 203-224.

[4] Mary Anne Raywid, "The Mounting Case for Schools of Choice," in Joe Nathan, ed., *Public Schools by Choice*, 13-40.

There is also an economic argument for choice. Schools of choice plans establish markets in public education, compelling schools to compete among each other for students, like firms compete in the market for customers. As schools compete, the quality of education improves and costs drop. This argument is based on the economic theory that competitive markets are the most efficient way to produce and distribute private goods.

Competitive markets do not presently exist in education because of public school monopolies. Students are assigned to neighborhood schools based on where they live. Parents cannot send their children to another school unless they either are willing to move or to send their children to a private or parochial school. Moving a residency, however, is typically based on a host of considerations in addition to the quality of schools. Further, the high cost of private schools deters parents who would otherwise find different schools for their children.

Under schools of choice, it is thought that schools will change to meet the needs of students, parents and teachers, just as businesses strive to earn greater profits than their competitors by diversifying and improving the quality of their goods and services. Consumers of such goods decide what they will purchase at what prices. Thus, decision making in a market economy is decentralized, and the net result is economic efficiency.

In the public sector, decision making is vested in the authority generated by democratic politics. In public education, democratic politics necessarily entails social costs as different groups compete to promote their own interests.[5] A variety of public school groups—elected public officials, school administrators at different levels, school boards, principals, teachers and their unions, taxpayers, parents and their children—become involved in politics to acquire, shape, and use public authority. The growth of bureaucracy in public education conflicts with the goal of quality education. What leads to quality education, notably strong school-based leadership and effective teaching, are located in the schools and are largely beyond bureaucratic scrutiny and control.

Through their choice of schools, parents decide on the content and quality of their child's education, even though they may have little say about school policy. The well-intended but often disruptive role of school boards, educational bureaucrats, and teacher unions in controlling the schools—each trying to pursue its own goals—may be reduced.

A non-economic argument for choice is that it facilitates desegregation. Proponents point to a few school districts that have been successful in using school choice to desegregate their schools, such as the Cambridge, Massachusetts school district. The Cambridge district introduced choice in the 1960s beginning with magnet schools. It attempted to establish a system of forced transfers to achieve racial balance. This approach faltered because whites began to leave the system. By 1981 the Cambridge district instituted a within-district choice system. The problem of racial imbalance has been alleviated and test scores have risen. Also, teacher, student and parent morale has improved.[6]

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[5] John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990).

[6] Robert Peterkin and Dorothy Jones, "Schools of Choice in Cambridge, MA," in Joe Nathan, ed., *Public Schools by Choice*, 113-124.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

Opponents of choice, though concerned about quality in education, put just as much emphasis on equal opportunity. They believe education to be more of a public than a private good. Public education benefits the entire society as it benefits individual consumers of education—students and their parents. Thus, opponents maintain that all citizens of this country, not just parents of school-aged children, have a stake in the success of the public schools. Indeed, the social and technological progress of the nation depend on the success of its schools. Social progress and the stability of a democracy depend on an informed and educated public. Technological progress hinges on having a large pool of young people who are interested in and well-schooled in math and science.

Opponents do not believe that it is possible to establish efficient markets in public education. They challenge the assumption, under choice, that most parents will take the time and be able to get the information needed to properly monitor the quality of the schools their children attend. The quality of education, like the quality of medical care, legal, and other professional services, is a difficult thing to measure. The reason that regulations, state licensing, monitoring, and enforcement exist is because they are effective solutions to this problem. Schools of choice plans, however, call for the deregulation of education. Without proper regulation, as has been true in child care and in long term care for the elderly, there may be poor quality. Those institutions properly regulated by state authorities tend to act more responsibly and provide better services than those that are not.

Some believe schools of choice may promote greater inequality in education. Since metropolitan areas are socially stratified, poor schools—those with low test scores—tend to be located in poor areas, and good schools—those with high test scores—tend to be located in affluent areas. Affluent suburban schools are able to avoid all of the social problems associated with poverty because poverty tends to be concentrated in central cities.

Under choice, suburban schools can maintain a reputation of high quality by creaming or admitting only a few of the best students from the central city—those with the highest test scores. This will lower the average test scores of central city schools and leave them with even more of the problems associated with poverty. This may have happened in St. Louis with the transfer of 11,000 of the "best and brightest" black students to the suburbs.[7] There is a danger of central city schools becoming a dumping ground for urban social problems. A state can prevent creaming if it compels local districts to accept out-of-district students by lottery. Doing so, however, curbs the autonomy of schools and thereby compromises an important goal of choice.

Opponents fear that choice plans may circumvent the state's responsibilities in the area of special education. School districts can maintain high test scores and the appearance of high quality by not accepting students with special problems. To avoid this, proponents of choice have suggested that these students be given special stipends, but opponents doubt that these stipends will be adequate.

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[7] Joe Nathan, "Progress, Problems, and Prospects with State Choice Plans," in Joe Nathan, ed., *Public Schools by Choice*, 210-212.

Another argument against schools of choice is that there are insufficient incentives to compel schools to compete against one another. In business, the reward of profits supplies the motivation for innovation, improved quality, reduced costs and increased sales. Do similar incentives work in schools of choice plans? For public schools, the "reward" is increased numbers of students. For school principals, it means a drain on existing resources; for teachers, it means greater class sizes. In order to work, then, choice plans must be accompanied by incentives that reward better schools in the way profits reward better businesses. Minnesota's statewide plan, for example, allocates $3,000 for every central city student accepted by a suburban district. Many wealthy suburban districts in metropolitan Detroit, however, spend far more than $3,000 per pupil of their own resources. These often are also districts that are reputed to have the best schools and are most likely to attract students.

Another criticism of choice is that it provides a limited response to the whole problem of mass urban education. It is probably impossible to separate urban social problems—teen pregnancy, drug abuse, delinquency, poverty—from urban education. Although these problems frequent suburban districts, they plague the central city schools. Urban educators, particularly those in the central city, face these problems daily and know they will not disappear with schools of choice. They fear that choice may detract public attention from them.[8] Creaming and public neglect may aggravate them. Urban educators are not necessarily opposed to choice; rather, they wish to see greater governmental efforts and resources focused on the broader problems of urban education.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHOICE ISSUE IN THE DETROIT METROPOLITAN AREA

Schools of choice, as it has gained salience nationally, is a school reform issue. Those interested in choice, whether proponents or opponents, care about the quality of the public schools. Clearly, choice is not a racial issue, and it does not divide blacks and whites. This is apparent because states and school districts have created schools of choice, such as magnet schools, as a means of reducing racial segregation in the public schools. For the Detroit metropolitan area, however, the long history of racial tension in education and deteriorating central city schools provides necessary context for understanding the choice issue. According to the Race Relations Task Force Report (1987), the Detroit metropolitan area is one of the most segregated in the United States. Segregation has been sharpened by the exodus of whites from the central city since the 1950s.[9] Interstate highways and a federally subsidized suburban housing market via FHA loans stimulated white flight. This condition accelerated after the 1967 riots and again after school busing was initiated in Detroit in the early 1970s.

[8] A few opponents recall how school choice was first used by Southern school districts to subvert the desegregation order of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision (*1954*). These districts established choice plans on paper in order to give the appearance of compliance with the *Brown* decision. However, when black parents would choose an all white school, these districts routinely denied blacks admittance, often on the grounds that the school lacked the room to accommodate them. Some civil rights activists are skeptical of school choice plans today because these plans have been used to circumvent desegregation efforts in the past.

[9] The Detroit Strategic Planning Project, *Race Relations Task Force Final Report*, (Detroit, 1987).

Events of the 1970s dramatized racial tensions over school busing. Racial violence erupted in several Detroit high schools. The Ku Klux Klan was tied to a school bus bombing in Pontiac. Opponents to both within and cross-district busing were quite active and vocal. Public opinion polls illustrated growing racial polarization over busing.

According to a Market Opinion Research survey taken for New Detroit, Inc., most Detroiters opposed busing, although a much greater percentage of whites than blacks opposed this policy (*Detroit Free Press*, May 2, 1975). Many felt that busing aggravated racial tensions. The survey taken just before implementation of court-ordered busing in Detroit revealed that one-third of the city's white parents with school-aged children claimed they would leave the city if busing went into effect. None of the black parents made this claim (*Detroit Free Press*, May 2, 1975).

The school busing issue was buried in the late 1970s. With the exodus of whites from the city, the Detroit school population was 89 percent black by the middle 1980s. The suburban districts remained almost exclusively white. Within-district busing was considered meaningless because most districts had become either predominantly black or predominantly white. Cross-district busing—a better approach for desegregating school districts—was prohibited by the *Milliken v Bradley (1974)* decision. The issue of race and education was laid to rest in the 1980s.

In the Detroit metropolitan area, therefore, it is not surprising that proposals for cross-district and statewide choice plans have exhumed the race issue. Anti-busing activists have already emerged to do battle with schools of choice proponents. A former Warren city council person and anti-busing activist who sponsored a 1971 resolution opposing cross-district busing said of Gov. Engler's choice proposal, "I just think he's opened up a can of worms" (*Detroit Free Press*, Feb. 6, 1991). He added, "The big issues I see are funding and local control, and number one is local control." Some opponents of choice, like busing opponents, see choice as undermining local control. Clearly, it may also reflect opposition to black intrusion into suburban school districts.

In Michigan, as in other states, citizen interest in choice has emerged in reaction to the deteriorating quality of public education and to the persistent disparities in educational resources and outcomes. Concerns about the quality of public education arise from declines in the academic performance of students. At the national level, Scholastic Aptitude Test scores have declined substantially from the high registered during the mid-1960s. In Michigan, there have also been declines in Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test scores during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Controversy over disparities in educational resources and outcomes stems directly from large differences between school districts in taxable property, per pupil spending for education, and student academic performance.[10]

[10] In the Detroit metropolitan area, in 1989-90, state equalized value per student ranged from a high of $267,255 for Bloomfield Hills to a low of $24,776 for Inkster, a ratio of greater than 10 to 1. Detroit's was $26,006, ranking 82nd out of 83 tri-county school districts. Wealthier districts not only levy a lower millage, they also spend more per student than poor districts. In 1988-89, spending per student ranged from a high of $8,319 for Bloomfield Hills to a low of $3,368 for Armada. Detroit spent $4,031, which is $4,228 less than Bloomfield Hills and ranked 59th. The overall academic performance of students from wealthier school districts far surpasses that of students from poorer districts. In 1990-91, on the MEAP, across three grade levels, an average of 77.5 percent of students from the Birmingham school district had attained mastery of test subjects in comparison to 23 percent for Inkster. The average for Detroit was 35.2 percent.

In recent years, controversy over disparities in educational resources has led to political turmoil over school financing and has overshadowed concerns about the quality of public education. Michigan school districts depend on two main sources of revenue: local property taxes and state aid. K-12 aid comprises membership aid and categorical aid and amounts to $2.36 billion. State aid as a proportion of total K-12 revenue has been shrinking. School districts have come to rely increasingly on local property taxes. The result has been twofold: relatively high property taxes and the equity problem. The state partly compensates for differences in wealth between school districts by giving disproportionate aid to poorer districts. Some wealthy districts, for example, are "out of formula" and receive little state aid. Despite this, a relative decline in state aid has meant growing disparities across school districts in spending per student.

Poorer school districts are in a bind. They can raise property taxes, but this may mean the unpopular action of raising millages. Also, doing so lowers the value of real property, discourages development and may reduce growth in the tax base. Districts can try to reduce the growth in expenditures on public schools; however, administrators and teachers are unhappy when their salaries are not competitive with those in other districts, and the quality of education can suffer. Wealthier districts are in a much better situation. The increasing value of real property means that millages can be held constant or reduced. This encourages development and growth in the tax base. School districts can spend more money without overburdening homeowners and other taxpayers.

In recent years, the issue of school financing has been at or near the top of the agenda of the state Legislature. The House, controlled by the Democrats, has been somewhat receptive to tax increases to enhance equity in school financing. The Senate, controlled by the Republicans, has staunchly opposed tax increases. Aside from this party difference, however, lawmakers are divided between those from "have" and those from "have-not" districts.

In November 1989, voters had the opportunity to vote for several ballot proposals that would have raised the state sales tax. Proposal A called for a small increase in the state sales tax to provide more money for K-12 education, but it neither cut property taxes nor addressed the equity issue. Proposal B called for a large increase in the state sales tax, a cut in property taxes, and additional K-12 money for poorer districts. Gov. Blanchard and the powerful Michigan Education Association (MEA), with close affiliations to the Democratic Party, backed Proposal A. Both pro-posals, however, were soundly defeated by the voters. In the 1990 election, John Engler (R) won a narrow victory over the incumbent. A significant issue in the campaign was Engler's promise to cut property taxes. Some thought that Blanchard lost because of his failure to deliver on this issue.

Currently, as a result of a recession and declining tax receipts, the state confronts a large budget deficit, yet property tax relief is still on the agenda. An agreement was reached to freeze 1992 property assessments. A bill that would address the equity problem by implementing tax-base sharing is expected to pass the Legislature. School districts would be divided into two groups and share one-half of the growth in their tax base with districts in their group (*Detroit Free Press*, June 5, 1991). Thus far, however, the only way the Legislature has been able to address the equity issue

is by adjusting the formula for categorical aid. About $50 million in aid was transferred from wealthier to poorer school districts, and in the 1991-92 State Aid Act for K-12 education, the amount will increase to $72 million. The wealthier districts, not surprisingly, are opposed to such "Robin Hood" measures.[11]

Whatever the resolution to the school financing issue in Michigan, there is a widespread perception, especially with regard to K-12 education, that relatively high spending on public education has not improved the academic performance of Michigan public school students compared to those in other states. Most vocal in their criticisms have been Republicans, conservative columnists, and the business community. They believe that the equity issue should take a back seat to the quality education issue. Democrats in the state are in a defensive posture because of the strong support they get from the Michigan Education Association (MEA). The association generally opposes state efforts to redistribute money among school districts. It believes the equity problem will be resolved with more money, and that more money will mean better quality schools.

Choice is neither the first nor the only educational reform in Michigan. Reform efforts in the city of Detroit are a special case. Faced with very high drop-out rates and poor MEAP test performances, Detroit has experimented with alternative and magnet schools, school empowerment, and the Detroit COMPACT project. School choice has only recently emerged as the most visible, controversial and promising education reform. It promises to improve quality, to empower parents, and to facilitate desegregation.[12] It is supported by the media, the governor, and a number of legislators. The city expects opposition by those with a strong stake in the present system: school administrators, some school board members, teacher unions, and other educational specialists. Thus, the success of school choice in Detroit and elsewhere in the metropolitan area may hinge, ultimately, on the level of public support it receives.

THE SURVEY: SUPPORT FOR VARIOUS SCHOOLS OF CHOICE OPTIONS IN THE DETROIT METROPOLITAN AREA

The DMAPPS study shows that, overall, there is widespread support for schools of choice in the Detroit metropolitan area. Support ranges from 77 percent to 48 percent depending on the proposed option (see Appendix A for question wording). As figure 1 shows, support is greater for options that reflect a lesser departure from the current method of pupil assignment based upon residence. The highest level of support—77 percent—is for choice within school districts.

Levels of support for more expansive choice options drop off a bit. Sixty-one percent support schools of choice across districts for those school districts agreeing to admit those children; 55

11 The state of Kentucky confronted a problem of equity in school financing similar to Michigan's. It was not until the state's supreme court declared the existing system of school financing to be unconstitutional that state government took action to reform that state's public schools (*Detroit Free Press*, June 10, 1991).

12 To some degree, Detroit already has established schools of choice including Cass Tech, Renaissance and Burton International magnet middle schools and alternative schools for gifted and talented students. See New Detroit, Inc., "Progress Report on the Detroit Public Schools," Number 3, Spring 1991.

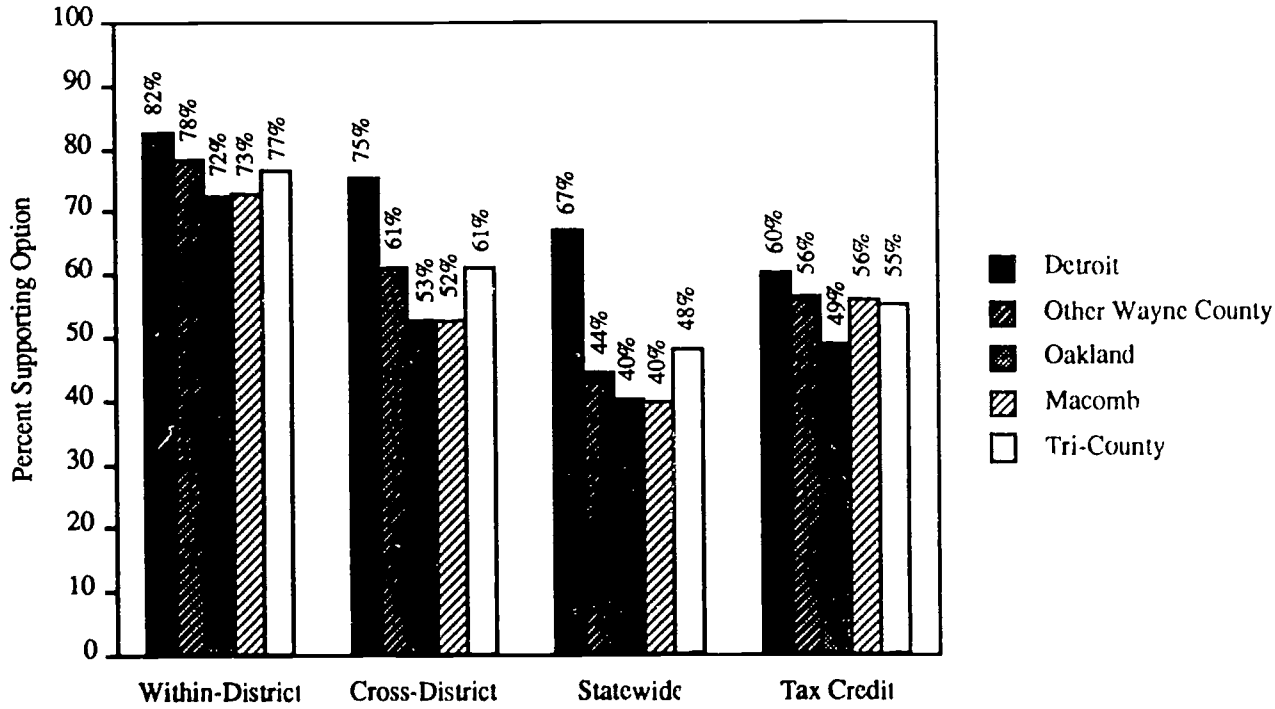
percent support tax credits for parents who send their children to private or parochial schools; and 48 percent support the option of statewide choice if state government pays the full costs of public schools, including transportation costs.

The level of support for choice within school districts in the metropolitan Detroit area mirrors a similarly high level nationwide. A 1987 Gallup Poll found that 71 percent supported choice.[13]

Levels of support for choice options are highest in Detroit, as illustrated in figure 1. Levels are marginally lower in other Wayne County communities and in Oakland and Macomb counties for reasons detailed below.

Figure 1

Support for Different Schools of Choice Options by Area



Among the schools of choice options, within-district choice is the easiest to implement and is the most feasible politically because of its minimal impact on public school administrators, principals and teachers. Nevertheless, there are a number of important problems that need to be addressed including assignment policies, program demands, adequate staff cooperation, parent outreach, adjustments for changes in school enrollments, and transportation programs.[14] Senate Bill 158 in the state Legislature would require local districts to establish school of choice planning committees.

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13 Alec M. Gallup and David Clark, "The 19th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1987.

14 Charles Glenn, "Putting Choice in Place," in Joe Nathan, ed., *Public Schools by Choice*, 149-164.

Other schools of choice options involve greater changes to the existing system and are more controversial politically. For example, the cross-district option, while it affords students the opportunity to attend schools in other districts, also may generate problems with applications and admissions procedures, amounts and methods of state payment, racial segregation, and transportation. It also may seem threatening. Those from districts with excellent schools may be opposed to sharing their schools and helping to pay for the education of students living in other districts. Those from poor school districts may oppose it because of the potential loss of students and state aid. The students from these districts who will take advantage of cross-district choice are most likely to come from families that put a high value on education, and their departure will represent a loss to their school districts.

Schools of choice plans within intermediate school districts, as outlined in Senate Bill 159, would be implemented slowly, at first within selected districts, generally corresponding to counties or groups of counties.[15] About $1 million would be budgeted to these intermediate school districts for planning.

QUALITY OF SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

The main goal of schools of choice, as is true of other reforms in education, is to improve the quality of the schools. Presumably, public support for such reforms is based largely on beliefs about whether or not they will lead to better schools and improved education. In recent years, public concern in Michigan and elsewhere about the quality of public schools has been heightened as a result of media attention to the issue in the aftermath of the 1983 publication, *A Nation at Risk*, a study that found in the schools, "...a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people" (p. 5).[16]

Strong public support for schools of choice reflects at least two factors. First, the word "choice" evokes the value of personal liberty. Americans decide for themselves where they will work, where they will live, where they will go to church, and what they will buy. Why shouldn't parents be allowed to decide where they will send their children to school? Second, many believe that there is a "crisis" in public education and that something needs to be done about it. The more desperate that the public perceives the problem to be locally, the stronger their endorsement of education reforms, including choice.

It is unlikely that strong public support for choice reflects a deep understanding of choice or the arguments of both proponents and opponents on whether or not choice will lead to better schools and improved education. As is true of other complicated public policy issues, the public is almost certainly uninformed about these specifics. It just wants better schools and improved education, and choice offers promise of providing these.

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15 Senate Education Committee, "Intermediate School Districts Schools of Choice," *S.B. 159*, 1-4.

16 National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, (Washington, 1983).

In the Detroit metropolitan area, residents' opinions about the quality of the public schools in their districts vary widely. Ratings of the quality of public schools by area are shown in figure 2. Residents of Detroit gave the lowest ratings to their public schools of any area—more than 75 percent rating them either fair or poor. Ratings were substantially higher in other Wayne County communities. In Macomb and Oakland Counties, less than 30 percent rated the public schools either fair or poor.

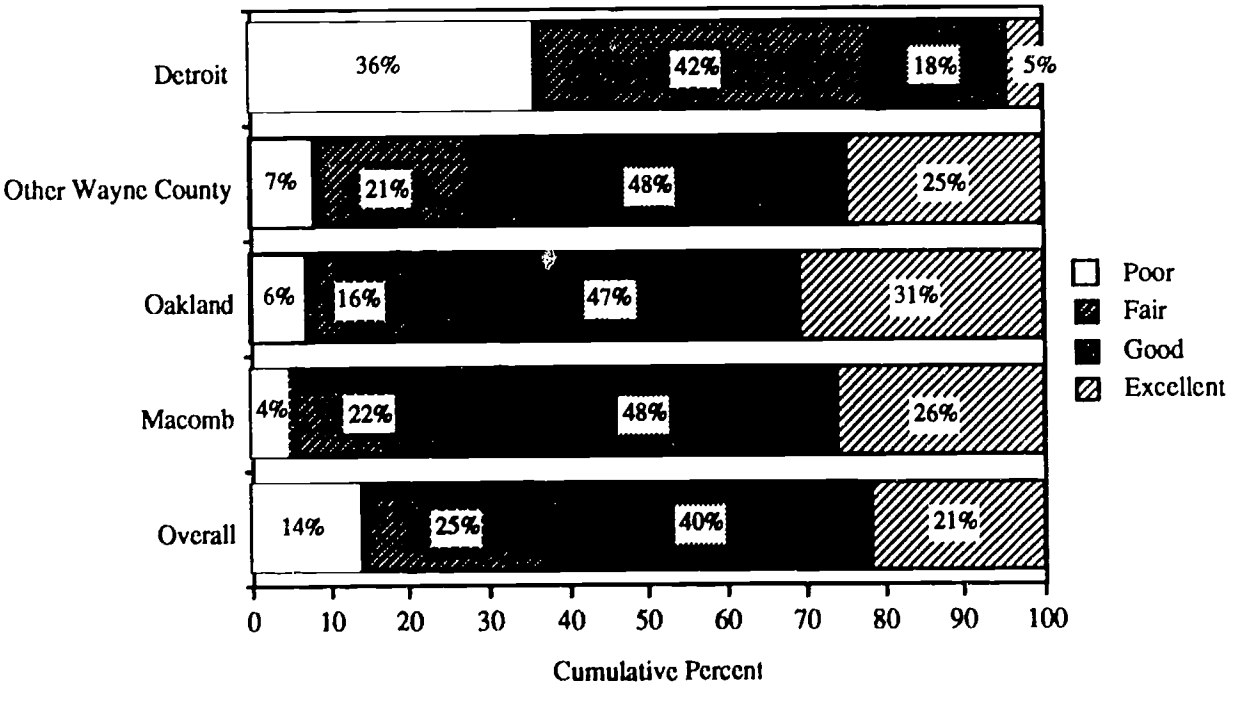
Are such ratings rooted in accurate perceptions of the quality of the public schools? Or are they inaccurate perceptions based on prejudice or misinformation?

Obviously, there is no single measure of the quality of public schools. Schools pursue a variety of goals as reflected in their curriculum, teaching staff and special programs. Nearly all schools, however, put high priority on the academic performance of their students in basic subjects such as math, reading and writing. Thus, although there is no comprehensive measure of school quality, it is possible to compare schools based upon the academic accomplishments of their students in basic subjects.

To construct such a measure, 1990-91 MEAP percentages were used. MEAP annually conducts tests of students in 4th-5th grade, 7th-8th grade, and 10th-11th grade in the areas of math, reading and science. The tests are designed to assess whether students in different grades

Figure 2

Ratings of the Quality of Public Schools by Area

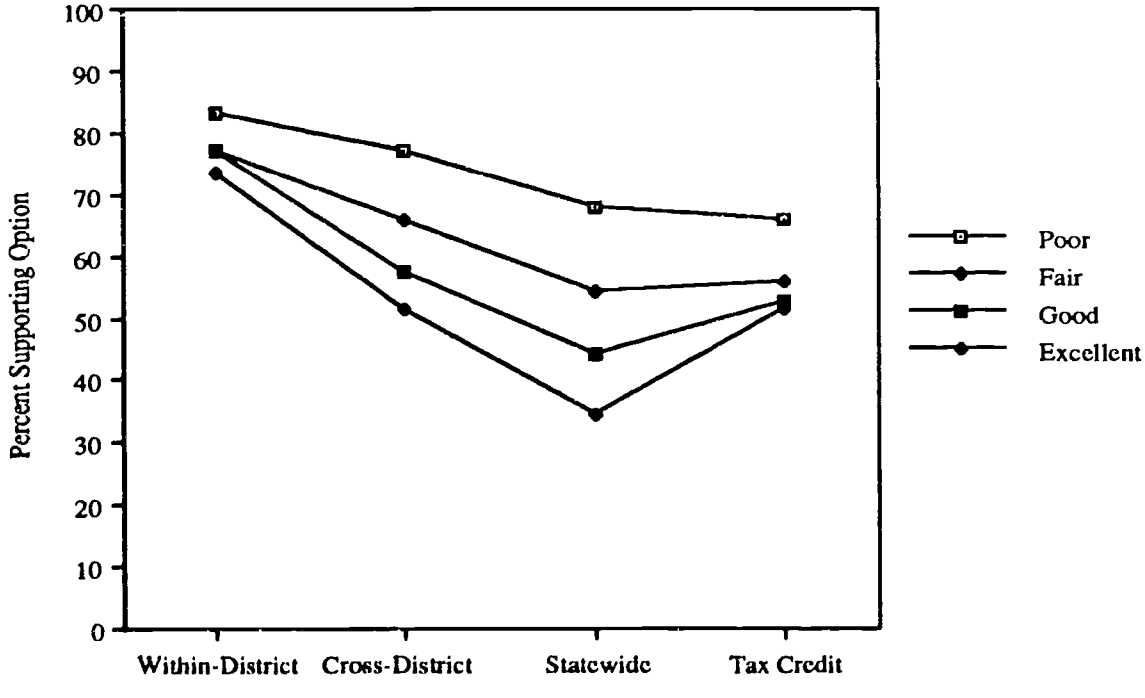


have accomplished a set of specific objectives in each of the areas. The MEAP reports the percentages of students in a district at a given grade level achieving mastery of a subject. To obtain an overall measure of the quality of student performance in a particular school district, an average was calculated of the percentage of students within a school district achieving mastery (i.e., the average of nine percentages for three grade levels and three tests).

This overall measure is closely associated with responses to the question included in the survey about the quality of the public schools.[17] Those judging the public schools in their district to be of good or excellent quality tend to live within districts where student academic performance is relatively high, as gauged by the MEAP, and vice versa for those judging the public schools to be of fair or poor quality.

According to the argument above, support for schools of choice options should depend directly upon ratings given to the public schools. As figure 3 shows, this is true. Support is highest among those rating their public schools as poor, next highest among those rating them as fair, and so forth. It can be argued that those who give low ratings to their public schools see schools of choice as an opportunity to improve education. They see little or nothing to lose from schools of choice, regardless of the specific option. Those who give high ratings to their public schools, on the other hand, are more divided.

Figure 3
Ratings of the Quality of the Public Schools and Support for Various Schools of Choice Options



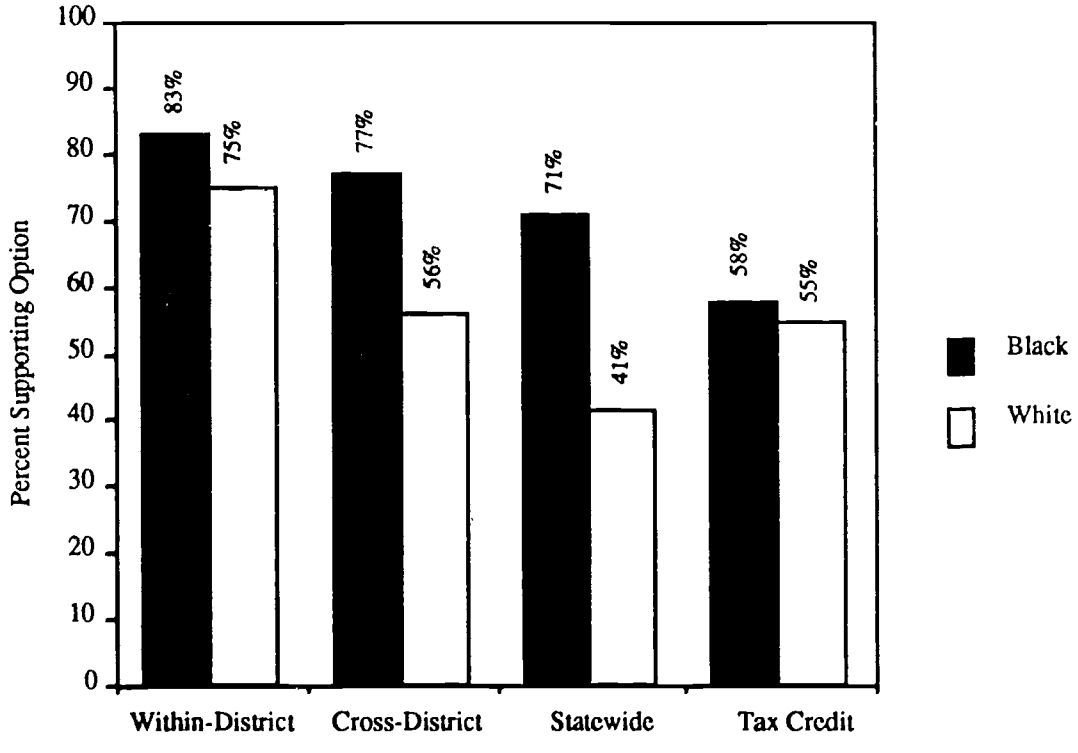
[17] Pearson's correlation is .56.

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS OF CHOICE BY RACE

As figure 4 shows, regardless of the specific option, both blacks and whites are supportive of schools of choice, although blacks are somewhat more supportive than whites. For the within district option, the difference between the races is moderate. The differences are substantial for the more expansive cross-district and statewide choice options. As for the option of tax credits, however, the difference is minimal.

Support for choice among both races, it can be argued, is driven by the concern for quality education. The somewhat greater support by blacks for schools of choice reflects the perception by many blacks that the public schools in their districts are of only fair or poor quality. They feel that black children under schools of choice will have the opportunity to attend better schools than they do currently. Whites are not as unhappy with the quality of public schools and therefore feel there is less to gain from schools of choice.

Figure 4
Levels of Support for Different Schools of Choice Options, by Race

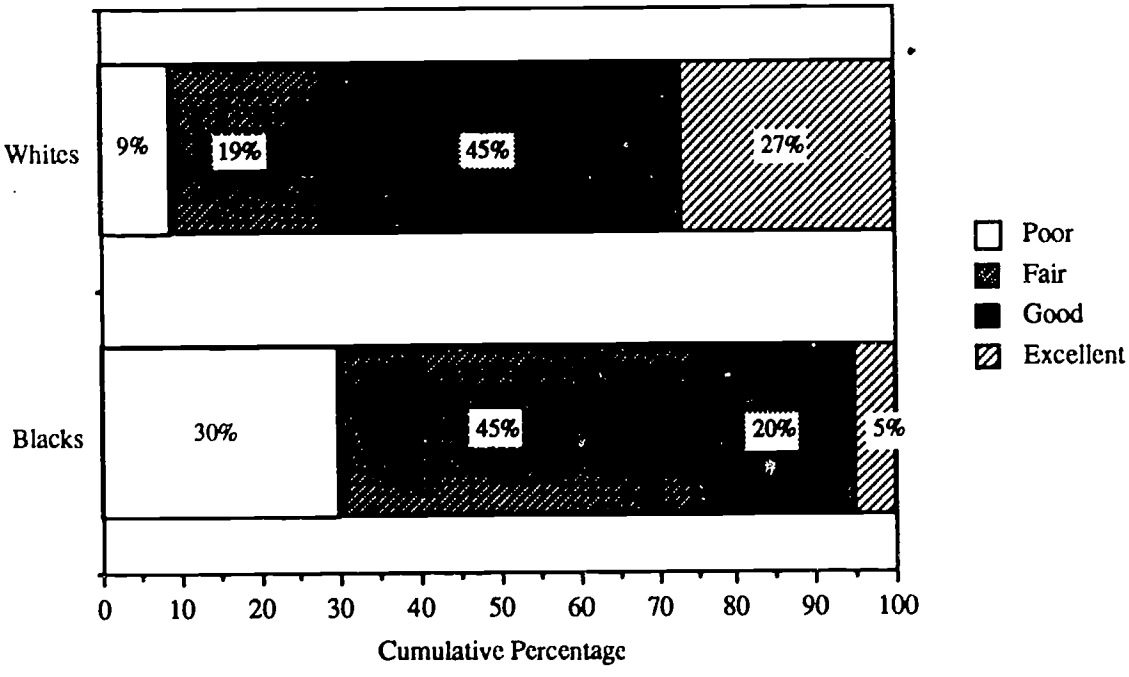


There is a sizable gap between the ratings that blacks give to the public schools and those that whites give, as seen in figure 5. The lower ratings that blacks give to their schools parallel the

relatively low MEAP scores of school districts in which black students are concentrated. Clearly, large numbers of blacks are dissatisfied with the quality of their public schools and this translates into strong support for reforms that might improve them, including schools of choice.

Should cross-district choice in the Detroit metropolitan area be implemented and expanded, inevitably, it will become linked with the issue of race. Will racial prejudice be a serious obstacle to implementing and expanding cross-district choice in the metropolitan area, particularly if large numbers of students are involved? For an answer to this question, Detroit residents and suburbanites were asked whether they would support cross-district choice if it meant students from Detroit attending suburban schools or, reciprocally, students from the suburbs attending Detroit schools. Sixty-seven percent of Detroit residents agreed that "parents from the city of Detroit should be allowed to send their children to public schools in suburban districts." Fully 50 percent of the residents of the suburbs also agreed with this, 10 percent were neutral, and 40 percent disagreed.

Figure 5
Ratings of Quality of Public Schools by Race



As for students from the suburbs attending Detroit schools, 68 percent of Detroit residents agreed that "parents in suburban districts should be allowed to send their children to the public schools in the city of Detroit." Forty-nine percent of the residents from the suburbs agreed with this. Thus, support for cross-district choice involving Detroit and the suburbs is supported by two-thirds of Detroit residents and one-half of suburban residents. This indicates that insofar as survey

respondents are being truthful, racial prejudice may not be an important reason for opposing cross-district choice.

SCHOOL FINANCING AND SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

Methods of financing public schools are a key element of schools of choice plans and may present a significant obstacle to their implementation in Michigan. There are a variety of methods of paying for schools of choice, depending on the specific plan.

Within-district choice requires few changes to current financing methods. A school district can budget additional resources for those schools that are successful in attracting greater numbers of students. It can successfully (or attempt to) close down schools that are losing students and failing. A school district may be able to reduce costs if its choice plan results in greater efficiencies. These savings may be offset, however, by increased costs in administering the choice plan and in transportation.

For broader plans, however, financial changes need to be more extensive. One approach, as in the Minnesota plan, is for state money to accompany each choice student who attends a school in another district. As argued above, in Michigan, such an approach is problematic. State money may not be a sufficient incentive for wealthy districts to attract students from other districts since wealthy districts will already be spending more per student than the amount of state money that accompanies each choice student. The marginal costs of choice students will be a drain on the district's resources. Clearly, either allotments for choice students must be set very high, which may be prohibitively expensive for the state, or the method of financing of education must be changed in some fundamental way.

As argued above, in Michigan, such an approach is problematic because state money may not be a sufficient incentive for wealthy districts to attract students from other districts. Such districts would already be spending more per student than the amount of state money that accompanies each choice student. The marginal costs of choice students would be a drain on the district's resources.

Another approach is for a state to disregard the problem of incentives, set a fixed dollar amount for each choice student, and mandate that school districts, whether wealthy or not, admit a given number of choice students. Because this involves compulsion, however, such an approach might be unpopular and difficult to implement. The success of broader plans will likely depend upon adequate incentives, local cooperation and broad based political support.

The public, to the extent that it is aware of school financing issues, should be deeply divided. There are conflicting values. In wealthy districts, residents may see little to gain and much to lose from sharing their resources with other districts. However, such residents, like most Americans, probably do support the idea of equal opportunity, a basic value in our society. In their view, the

state should find some way of helping out poorer school districts, but not at the expense of wealthy districts. In poor districts, on the other hand, residents may see much to gain and nothing to lose from greater sharing of resources. From their perspective, the issue is one of fairness.

Public support for state action to help poorer districts is reflected by opinion in the Detroit metropolitan area. A very large majority, 79 percent, indicate they would support state government giving more money to poorer districts to reduce differences among districts in spending per student. Support for such action is nearly unanimous (94 percent) among blacks.

Public support for state action is much lower, however, if such action would result in the loss of local control over school financing. This is reflected by opinion on the statewide choice option that would involve the state government paying the full costs of the public schools. Such an option, since it would reduce differences in the amounts that school districts spend per student, would not benefit the wealthy districts. Support for such an option, as figure 4 shows, is lowest among those giving an excellent rating to the public schools (36 percent), who tend to be the residents of wealthier districts. Clearly, state government in Michigan cannot afford to bring levels of spending per student in all districts up to levels achieved currently in the wealthiest districts. The residents of wealthier districts fear that state funding will result in a redistribution of the property tax base and lower the quality of their schools.

Other methods of financing schools of choice associated with more expansive plans are not being seriously considered in Michigan. The largest change from current practice would put the power of the purse in the hands of parents. Parents who enroll their children in a particular school can be given a tax credit or tuition voucher to pay for some or all of the costs of their children's education. Tax credit plans for education work like other tax credits. They reduce parents' taxes or increase their tax refunds. Tuition vouchers are used by parents for partial or full payment of school tuition. The amount of the voucher could be determined by state government or by the local school district itself. In the latter case, the voters of a local school district through their elected school boards, can decide how much to spend for the tuition of children living in the district, thereby determining the amounts of each voucher.

In the metropolitan area, a majority of residents (55 percent) support tax credits. Support is highest (90 percent) among parents who send one or more of their children to private schools. Such parents pay double for education—once through taxes and again through tuition. They would like relief.

There are likely to be a number of legal impediments in Michigan to enacting and implementing schools of choice plans that involve tax credits or tuition vouchers. The state constitution, for example, explicitly forbids state money going to support parochial schools.

WHO WOULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SCHOOLS OF CHOICE?

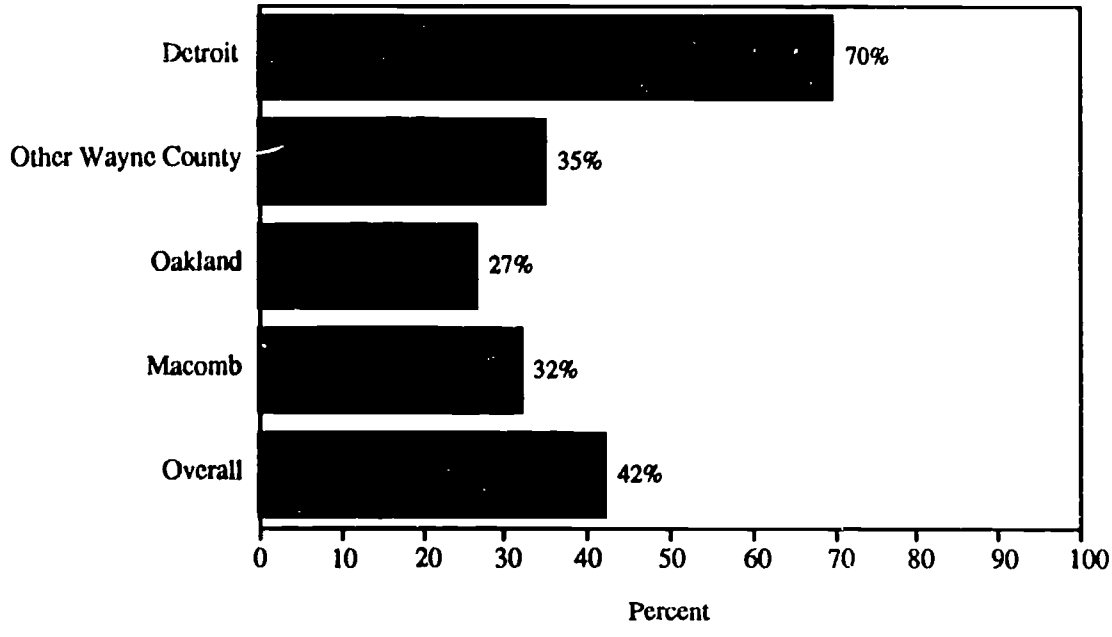
The number of parents in the metropolitan area who would choose different schools for their children if given the opportunity is unknown. In the survey, parents with children in the public schools were asked whether, if state law allowed, they would consider sending any of their children to a school in another district? Figure 6 shows the responses to this question by area. Overall, 42 percent said yes to this question, 55 percent no, and 3 percent did not know. The percent answering yes was highest in Detroit (67 percent) and lowest in Oakland County (27 percent). The percent in Detroit reflects that black parents (67 percent) were far more likely to answer yes than white parents (32 percent).

For parents, the quality of public schools in their own district is the most important factor affecting their decision to send their children to a school in another district. Among those giving a "poor" rating to their public schools, 77 percent would consider it; among those giving an excellent rating, however, only 33 percent would consider it.

Overall, although 42 percent would consider sending their children to school in another district, the percentage who would actually do so should cross-district school choice become an option will be much smaller. For example, in Minnesota, where there is state-wide choice, less than one percent of students attend schools in another school district.

Figure 6

Percent of Parents Who Would Consider Sending Their Children to a School in Another District



There are many reasons why parents who would consider sending their children to schools in another district are likely to reject it, at least initially, in favor of the schools of their own district. One reason is the fear by both parents and students of the unknown. Schools in other districts are far from home. It may be more difficult for parents to consult with teachers and monitor the education of their children. Parents may be reluctant to send their children to schools attended mostly by children of another race and different social background. Students may be reluctant to leave their friends behind and attend schools where they might be considered outsiders.

Other reasons are linked to the implementation of schools of choice. Transportation may be a problem. Will the school districts provide it or will it be the job of parents? If it is the job of parents, cross-district choice is likely to be an attractive option only for parents who are able to find a suitable school that is close to their place of employment. The ability of schools to admit additional students from other school districts may be limited. Student/teacher ratios may already be high or there may be limited classroom space. Most importantly, as discussed above, there may be little incentive for school districts to attract students from other school districts if they must spend more money on those students than they get in return. At least initially in this state cross-district choice, as in Minnesota, is unlikely to have much of an impact. It seems implausible that plans involving only about one percent of the students attending public schools in other districts would result in widespread education benefits that proponents of schools of choice expect.

CONCLUSION

Over the last 25 years the academic performance of students attending public schools in the United States has declined. Such declines have occurred in spite of periodic efforts at reform and increasing expenditures per student at the state and local level. Not surprisingly, everyone with a stake in public education has tried to shift the blame. Parents blame the schools. School boards blame the teachers and their unions. Teachers blame students, their parents, television, and the lack of community support for the schools.

Whatever the causes of the decline in academic performance, its deleterious effects upon human capital spell out the possibility of a dismal economic future for the United States. The United States already has lost its comparative advantage in basic industries such as automobiles, consumer electronics and steel, and it is steadily losing its comparative advantage in high technology. The number of industries where the United States retains a comparative advantage—such as agriculture, business services, commercial aircraft, communications equipment, computer software, cultural industries, military hardware and pharmaceuticals—is steadily diminishing. In regard to human capital, the United States is disinvesting. It is still able to enjoy the fruits of an educational system that was better than its economic competitors two or three decades ago, but this advantage will steadily erode as its older workers retire.

The public schools in the United States used to be source of national pride. They emphasized basic academic skills, introduced children to civic culture, and provided opportunities for social mobility to millions of immigrants and their families. Today, they seem to be a national embarrassment.

Despite this, high quality public schools still exist today. After a decade of research, the characteristics associated with effective schools are well-known. Unfortunately, it is difficult to realize these characteristics in schools located in problem-plagued large cities like Detroit.

To proponents of schools of choice, the main problem in public education is control of the public schools through democratic politics. Such politics leads inevitably to the growth of bureaucracy as different stakeholders in public education seek to establish, defend and perpetuate their particular interests and values. This growth of bureaucracy runs counter to school-based organization that makes possible effective schools—vigorous leadership from the school principal and quality teaching.

Proponents of schools of choice plans further argue that real reform will break the link between democratic politics and control of the public schools. Chubb and Moe propose a plan in which the main function of elected school boards would be to determine how much money will be spent on the education of the district's children.[18] Parents would be responsible for choosing schools for their children whether these schools were located inside or outside their school district. After meeting minimum standards defining a public school, schools would set their own goals, establish their own policies, hire and fire their own teachers and staff, set their own tuition levels, and be free to accept or reject applicants. A district would partially or wholly reimburse schools for the tuition costs of its students.

No schools of choice plan this far-reaching is on the legislative agenda in Michigan. It is not politically feasible. There is continuing and strong support for the democratic control of education. This is true not only because of the vested interests of different groups in education (including teacher unions, local school board members, administrators and others), but also because of a strong belief in the value of public education. The loss of democratic control of public education might have profound effects. The functions of school boards would be reduced. Jobs in school administration would disappear. The pay and perquisites of school principals would depend upon the performance of their schools and their ability to attract students. Schools unable to attract sufficient numbers of students would be permitted to fail. Teachers would no longer be protected by statewide tenure systems, and their pay would depend less on advanced degrees and seniority and more on merit as gauged by their classroom and service performance.

The three groups that are most supportive of schools of choice include some public officials, business and the public. The most important of these is the public. In the Detroit metropolitan area,

[18] John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, 1990, 215-226.

the survey results show that the public generally supports schools of choice. Support seems to be based on two factors: (1) the linkage of choice to the value of personal liberty, and (2) dissatisfaction with the quality of public education. The public shows caution, however, and support is greatest for options that represent the smallest departure from the present system. Most telling are findings regarding support for cross-district choice. Here, self interest is paramount. Those rating their schools to be of only fair or poor quality, notably many blacks, may support the option because they perceive their public schools to be of only fair or poor quality and want to give the children of their district the opportunity for a better education, even if this means attending a school in another district. Those rating their schools to be good or excellent, notably many whites, are relatively happy with the quality of their public schools and would not send their children to the schools of another district. They do not see any particular benefit to themselves or their children from schools of choice. They would just as soon keep the advantages that they already enjoy.

To many in the public, support for schools of choice must seem very American. It is consistent with the American value of freedom—freedom of choice. It is part of the American spirit of laissez-faire capitalism, individualism and limited government. A good percentage of suburbanites even feel that students from Detroit should have the opportunity to attend schools in their districts. The prospect of black students from Detroit enrolling in the public schools of their district from schools of choice is apparently far more tolerable than the same result achieved through compulsory court-ordered school busing.

What are the prospects for schools of choice in the Detroit metropolitan area? Realistically, the recent history of public school reform efforts is not encouraging. It is uncertain whether or not schools of choice plans will be enacted in a form and implemented on a scale to achieve the results desired by their proponents. Whatever the future holds, the public in the Detroit metropolitan area is generally supportive of schools of choice and would like to see such plans take root and flourish.

APPENDIX A

DMAPPS 1991 Questions on Schools of Choice

Parents should be allowed to send their children to public schools in other school districts that agree to admit those children. Do you agree, disagree, or are neutral?

Parents in suburban districts should be allowed to send their children to the public schools in the city of Detroit. Do you agree, disagree, or are neutral?

Parents from the city of Detroit should be allowed to send their children to public schools in suburban districts. Do you agree, disagree, or are neutral?

Parents who are dissatisfied with the public schools within their district always have the option of moving to another district. Do you agree, disagree, or are neutral?

Suppose that state government paid the full costs of public schools, including transportation costs. Would you support a state law that allows parents to send their children to any public school in the state?

Would you support a state law providing tax credits for parents who send their children to private or parochial schools?

How would you rate the quality of the public schools in your school district? Would you say they are excellent, good, fair, or poor?

Some school districts in the State of Michigan are able to spend more money per student than other school districts. Should state government give more money to poorer districts in order to reduce these differences?

Suppose the state insured equal funding for school districts. Would you be more or less likely to support a state law that allowed parents to send their children to any public school in the state? Would you say more likely, less likely, or neither?

If state law allowed, would you consider sending any of your children to a school in another district?

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The Center for Urban Studies (CUS) provides Wayne State University (WSU) with a central organization to analyze, interpret and respond to contemporary urban issues. This urban focus is central to the university mission of providing research expertise and information, training, and professional service to the Detroit metropolitan community. The center's research capabilities coupled with direct and frequent contact with community/government organizations enable the center to develop program/policy options for resolving issues.

For nearly 25 years, the center, in the College of Urban, Labor and Metropolitan Affairs has served as an important "urban link" between university resources and the metropolitan public and private sectors. Working in cooperation with seven specialized program areas, as well as faculty partners within the university, the center provides services to such groups as: local, county, and state government agencies; educational institutions; human service agencies; business; and nonprofit organizations. The center's seven areas include the following: The Urban Linkage Program, Survey & Evaluation Services, the Michigan Metropolitan Information Center, Urban Families Program, Urban Transportation Institute, Technical Resources Program, and the Economic Development Program.